

News & Notes

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ISLAMIC AND ROMAN REMAINS UNCOVERED IN QUSEIR AL-QADIM, EGYPT

by Donald Whitcomb and
Janet H. Johnson

When we returned to Quseir this January, it was hard to believe that two years had passed since our first season of excavations. This small port on the Egyptian coast of the Red Sea showed us the same quiet, warm hospitality. The only difference is that the coastal road which runs through the middle of the site brings more traffic this year, including a few tourists as this part of Egypt becomes known to travellers. These newcomers are probably not aware of the dramatic change in the desert this year. Last October, the eastern desert of Egypt received very heavy rains, and flooding occurred in many places, including the remains of the ancient Roman harbor at Quseir al-Qadim, which were covered with a fresh layer of silt from the wadi. A more pleasant result of the rains was literally the blooming of the desert: On the site as well as in the mountains, the normal reds and browns of the desert are now relieved by spots of green in depressions and drainage.

Besides being an unexpected and almost miraculous pleasure to the eye, the sprouting of these desert plants was especially exciting for the palaeoethnobotanist on our expedition, whose collections of this natural, although rare, vegetation include wild flowers and even some little wild melons. These are especially useful for comparison with the seeds and the plant remains recovered from the excavations, although the edible seeds most frequently found in both the Roman and Islamic occupations are standard foods and fodder such as wheat, barley, and even alfalfa. Other common Egyptian foods are present, such as dates, lentils, and chickpeas, along with more exotic plants, such as almonds, walnuts, grapes, and peppercorns. Normally such remains are only rarely preserved when accidentally burned; at Quseir al-Qadim most of the excavated areas have produced, with careful sieving, botanical remains that are not only abundant but almost modern in degree of preservation.

In a sense, about half of our excavations are "modern" by archaeological standards, for one of the two aspects we are studying is the Islamic port. These Islamic remains are located on low bluffs where it is difficult not to be distracted by the blue and turquoise of the sea just beyond the trenches. "Trenches" is perhaps a misnomer for the large shallow excavations with wall foundations delimiting rooms and courtyards. As was true of the Islamic houses excavated during the



1978 season, these Islamic houses were easily and quickly uncovered. Some courtyards had almost a meter of organic debris, matting, basketry, and rope. Mixed with this material were ceramics which indicate a 15th or 16th century date, including Chinese celadons and porcelains (with Near Eastern blue and white imitations) and even some Italian majolica sherds. Beneath one wall we found a large painted wooden box with its lid still in place. With some excitement we opened the box to find a woman's personal treasure—a comb, lumps of henna for her hair, a cloth bag of leaves (tea?), little parcels of other herbs, and a tiny metal talisman protecting the whole collection. We have found multitudes of colorful glass bangles and a few pieces of jewelry such as a delicate bronze ring (fig. 1).



Figure 1 Bronze Ring

The rubbish left by this medieval population also includes masses of seeds and bones, especially fish bones and, more rarely, goat and sea turtle, indicating a heavy dietary reliance on the sea. Our zoologist has encountered unexpected problems of preservation—there is occasionally too much meat left on the bones for easy identification! Problems of identification of fish are partially remedied by the discovery of fish heads, tails, fins, and scales. Eventually a whole parrot fish and half a shark (named Jaws) were excavated (the latter was labelled on the site plan as a "creature feature").

(Continued on pg. 2)

As rich in architecture and artifacts as the Islamic remains at Quseir al-Qadim are, they are only half of the excavations—the half east of the coastal road through the site. On the western side we have been investigating the Roman occupation, at which time the port was named Leukos Limen. We began where our excavations in 1978 uncovered a room with an iron working furnace. We have cleared the narrow street next to this room and are working on the large Roman building, perhaps a villa, across this narrow street. At present a little more than half of the building has been uncovered. Whatever the status of its Roman occupants, they (or their house) are now definitely “below the salt.” Nearly two thousand years of even infrequent rainfalls have turned the decayed mudbrick walls into solid caliche or rock salt, from 20 cm. to over a meter thick. After breaking several pick handles and a steel pick, we borrowed a pneumatic drill from the phosphate company nearby. This experiment in mechanized excavation failed and we settled on sledge hammers and chisels. We often feel more like miners than archaeologists.

Once the salt crust was removed, however, the contents of the villa were a pleasant surprise. In 1978 we found many artifacts but only a few complete vessels. This season suddenly we have a series of rooms filled with whole pots. For example, a corner room next to the narrow street held about fifteen small round jars with tiny spouts (fig. 2), which probably contained a semi-precious liquid such as olive oil. These jars had rolled around the floor like so many marbles among other stored objects, such as a small mill for grinding flour (complete with wooden handle), a large wooden bowl not unlike a modern salad bowl, and an assortment of wooden pulleys and

mechanical parts. The most puzzling feature was below these objects—a complete intact roof with beams, wooden stringers, matting and mud. This presented us with a paradox of fallen objects heavy and fragile, mostly unbroken. An adjoining room was so large that it was probably not roofed at all; it was filled with large amphorae and storage jars, all smashed but reconstructible. Also in this room were several large baskets and a press, perhaps for olive oil—we have recovered a few olive pits.

In 1978 we carefully mapped all the surface indications of walls, buildings, or other features for the whole town. This season we are testing these results with a long one-meter wide trench across the middle of the town, which we call the “pipeline.” It has yielded a large amount of diverse information and artifacts, from Islamic houses to parts of large Roman buildings, Roman lamps (fig. 3), terracottas (fig. 4), and

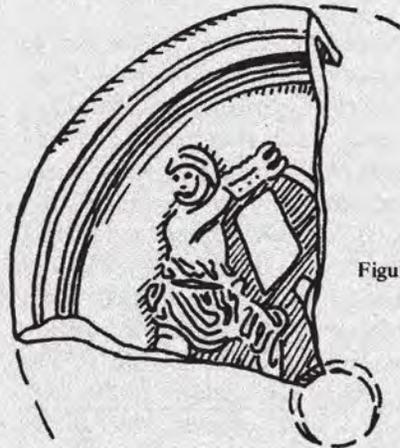


Figure 3 Roman Lamp

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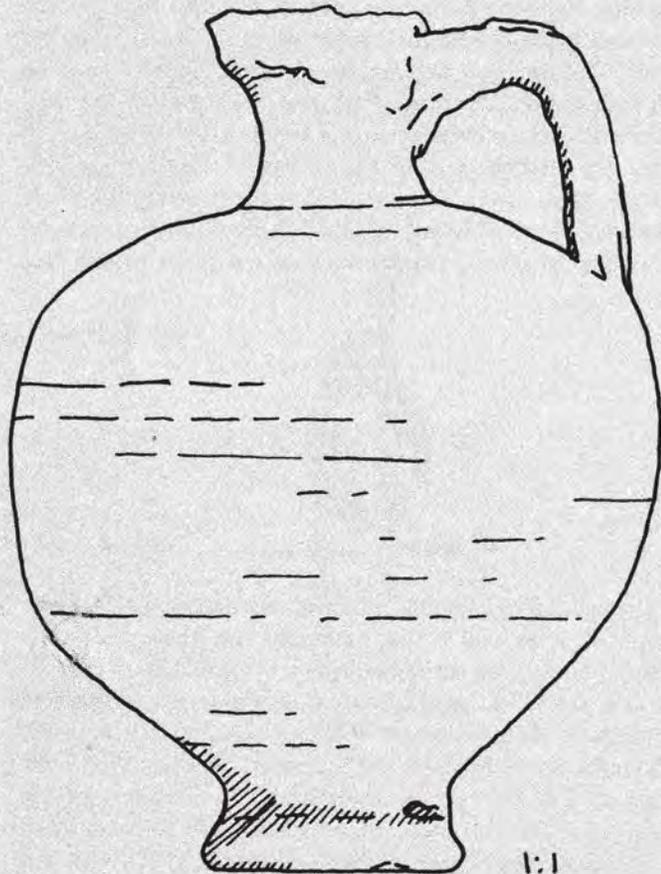


Figure 2 Round jar with tiny spout

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Figure 4 Terracotta

1:1

ostraca. With each object and each wall in this trench we have a tantalizing fragment, a glimpse into the complexities of this Roman and Islamic port. We have only a few short weeks left in the season, and look forward to what new materials and problems lie in store for us.

WHAT IS IT AND IS IT REAL GOLD?



Adopted as the Institute's logo: "This roundel is outstanding not only as the largest ornament of the type known but still more for its quality. Restrained within the circuit of a slender, twisted cord, a lithe-bodied lion, transfigured by the glory of a great upsweeping wing, turns as if in snarling defiance of pursuers. The forelegs are still stretched in the stride of a walk just ceased, while the hind-quarters seem already tensed for possible battle; the curious small horns and the ear are bent back sullenly and threateningly; the tail lashes. Actually, it is only such details of rendering which give the design its particular vividness, for it is but a variant of one of the commonest of Achaemenid Persian decorative motives—the winged beast turning back its head. Usually this motive gives the impression of a gracefully curved but emotionless animal, so that in its vigor the Chicago lion is outstanding." Helene J. Kantor, Professor of Archaeology, The Oriental Institute, on Achaemenid Jewelry in *The Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. XVI, No. 1.

Visitors to the Oriental Institute museum always oh-and-ah over our Achaemenid treasure, which consists of a gold necklace and 53 appliquéés made of thin sheet gold: A spectrographic analysis shows that the metal is a composition of 87% gold, 10% silver and 1% copper. All the ornaments in the collection are typical examples of the Achaemenid style and of a quality illustrating the highest achievement of Persian goldsmiths dating from about 552 to 330 B.C.

Greek writers often mention the tremendous wealth of the Persians, who did not keep their gold as inert ingots but fashioned them into objects. It is said that when Xerxes led his army on his ill-fated expedition to Greece, his troops were so splendidly bedecked that they glittered all over with gold. The story goes that when the Persian fleet was wrecked off Magnesia in Thessaly a man who farmed land along the coast became very wealthy by collecting gold and silver drinking cups and other precious objects that were washed ashore. When the empire fell, the treasures heaped up in the store houses of Persepolis provided tremendous booty for the Macedonian and Greek conquerors.

Achaemenid art, the last of the great ancient oriental arts, appeared suddenly. The Indo-Iranians, who became heirs to all the political power of the Near East in the sixth century B.C., needed capitol buildings ornamented with suitable splendor, so they imported craftsmen from all over their empire and

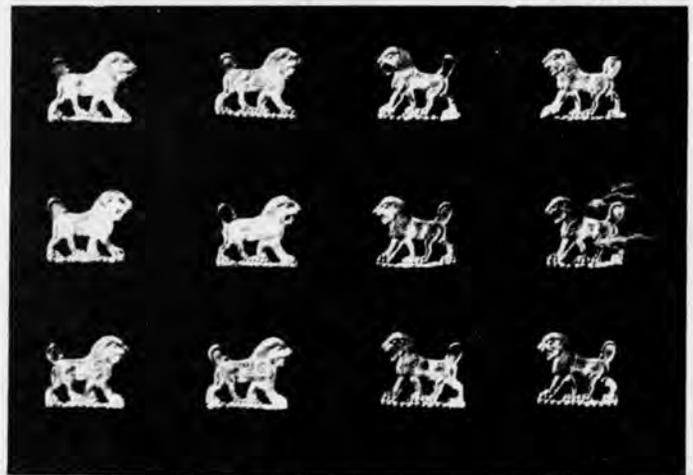
adopted the iconography of earlier western Asiatic art. Dr. Kantor comments in the article cited above: "The miracle is that the result was a unified whole, informed with its own specific genius through sharing its emphasis on decorative form with all the antecedent styles of Iranian art. Of the art of the Persians before they seized hegemony in the Near East we know nothing. Insofar as it existed at all, it could have consisted of decorated horse trappings and other objects suitable to nomads and analogous in general to the varieties of decorated objects produced by Scythian tribes."

According to Dr. Kantor, the Chicago treasure is important for several reasons. It epitomizes, for example, many major characteristics of Achaemenid art. Animal figures form the majority of the motives of our group, as of Achaemenid decorative art as a whole. A second contribution of the Oriental Institute treasure involves the relations between Achaemenid and nomad art. Hitherto relatively few examples of Achaemenid sewed-on plaques have been known, but now the Chicago and related pieces illustrate what has already been evident from classical texts — that the Persian use of such golden bracteates indeed rivaled the sumptuousness of the Scythians. Third, Dr. Kantor says that our group adds some unusual motives to the Achaemenid repertory. The four small roundels, for example, provide a striking combination of two animal forms into an intertwined pattern, a type of motive up until now rarely exemplified in Achaemenid art and for the most part confined to seals. Finally, in its richness and in the excellence of such pieces as the necklace and the large lion bracteate, the Chicago group provides a sample of the quality and character of the treasures for which the Achaemenids were famed in ancient times.

—Elda Maynard—



Necklace and ornament.



Twelve gold striding lions in low relief.

MEMBER COURSES SPRING 1980

Introduction to Egyptian Hieroglyphs

Frank Yurco, doctoral candidate in Egyptology.

In this series of lectures Mr. Yurco will discuss the basic principles of the grammar and writing of the ancient Egyptian language. Emphasis will be on the reading of actual texts, some chosen from objects in the museum collection. Members will be expected to participate in classroom discussions and to complete assignments in writing and translation. Sir Alan Gardiner's Egyptian Grammar will be used as the basic source.

Saturdays, 10:00-noon, April 5-June 14 (ten weeks, no class on May 31). \$60.00 for members, \$75.00 for non-members (including a membership). Lectures will be held at the Oriental Institute.

From Ur of the Chaldees to Jonah's Nineveh: Mesopotamian Royal Cities

Grant Frame, doctoral candidate in Assyriology.

The royal cities of Babylonia and Assyria will be the focus of this slide and discussion series. History, archaeology, art and literature (in translation) will be used to understand the institutions of these ancient cities. The matter of town planning and the differences between the cities of Babylonia and Assyria will be stressed.

Saturdays, 10:00-noon, April 5-May 24 (no class on April 19). \$50.00 for members, \$65.00 for non-members (including a membership). Lectures will be held at the Oriental Institute.

REGISTRATION ENDS THURSDAY, APRIL 3, 1980.

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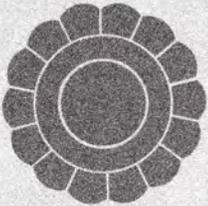
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